Environment and Planning A 2007, volume 39, pages 242 – 259

DOI:10.1068/a38120

Approaching life in the London garden centre: acquiring entities and providing products

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Received 31 March 2005; in revised form 2 August 2005

Abstract. For some geographers, the world has become imaginatively alive with arrays of new nonhumans. Yet how well these vocabularies actually adhere to personal practice is something which could be better explored. Recent accounts of consumption, meanwhile, are committed to closely observed contextual experience. Yet, physical things can seem somewhat subdued in these accounts. With these ideas in mind, in this paper I align a geographical embrace of material vitality and an in-depth approach to practised consumption. I report on a period of ethnographic work with seven garden centres in London to reconsider the ways in which contemporary urbanites encounter the items on sale there. In the London garden centre there are some different ways of approaching life and some changing cultures of control, as the rumbling agencies that certain products purvey are both openly enjoyed and nervously negated. Exploring the unease associated with this situation and its impact upon personal behaviour and physical format, I reflect, in particular, on the current experience of plants. The conclusion that follows is potentially perverse as, although we can benefit from being with life, it seems that, in certain city spaces at least, we now deal better with that which is more dead.

Introduction

In the United Kingdom there has been much media discussion about the changing status of the everyday phenomenon that we know of as a domestic garden. What certain formats of popular televised 'makeover' shows seemed to suggest was that a garden was becoming something which could be quickly and easily acquired and this triggered a flurry of popular commentary about what these spaces were, what they were becoming, and what they should be (for example, Barron, 2001; Bedell, 2003; Keen, 2000; Vidal, 1999). One particular aspect of these discussions related to the experiences associated with the phenomenon of the living plant as, for some commentators, these programmes marked the advent of a negative new kind of approach to this category of thing. In this paper I take this discussion as a starting point from which, rather than dwelling on media representation, these issues are examined according to material practice. This is because empirical work was needed here. This proliferation of press speculations was interesting, and potentially transformative in its own right, but the point was that, without an analysis of actual activity, it would remain only as a set of speculations. In the research that I draw on, therefore, arguments about evolving garden relations were questioned by regrounding these broad concerns through a focus on consumption, plants, and actual practice as, between 2002 and 2003, plants were followed as they passed between four different types of site in London. In order to analyse the wider arguments that were at the time in abundance, a central aim, therefore, was to understand whether the intimate arrangements of entity, artefact, and activity evident within these sites were, or were not, actually evolving. In this specific paper I am concerned for one of these four, namely the London garden centre.

Theoretically, this endeavour was partly inspired by certain human geographers for whom, in this journal and elsewhere, the physical world has started to stir (see, for instance, Hinchliffe, 2001; Jones and Cloke, 2002; Whatmore, 2002). New forms of

agency have here been 'summoned' (Thrift, 2004) by some vitalistic vocabularies that seek to better accommodate active presences that are never, in the last instance, simply and simplistically 'human'. Importing, amongst others, insights from actor-network theory and feminist technoscience, the routine social world, through this lens, is potentially populated by some interesting new kinds of character and, correspondingly, geographers have started to concern themselves with the different dynamic entities with which we live (see, for two examples, Davies, 2000; Whatmore and Thorne, 2000). Following in the footsteps of urban ecology, this approach has now begun to be applied to cities where it offers a useful new way of getting to grips with the physical encounters that hitherto fell between the cracks of a political concern for people and a scientific concern for species (Hinchliffe et al, 2003; Latour, 2004). Spencer and Whatmore (2001) have argued for a reconsideration of 'biogeography' to help us map what are, quite literally, geographies of 'life' and, in this sense, we can now imagine an evolving expanse of animate urban space where specific creatures can come together.

Yet, although this stance is exciting, what I want to emphasise at the outset is the importance of attending to how easy these encounters actually are. As Castree (2003a, page 209) argues here, "the stage is now set for geographers to move beyond suggestive metaphors" and to more closely consider the tensions that exist between academic evocations and wider-lived experiences. This paper is written in this spirit where, as I said, I am empirically concerned with the phenomenon of the garden centre and, specifically, those centres that are found in London. Garden centres are interesting in the way that they must reconcile some opposing imperatives. They tread a line between providing a set of saleable products and a series of potentially animate entities and, in this regard, the plants found within them occupy a potentially challenging position. This is insofar as, even though their value may derive from the willfullness that they subsequently display within actual gardens, they are assumed to have a current commodity status in which they possess certain allocated and object-like attributes (Kopytoff, 1986, page 65). As we know, market processes can be difficult when we try to trade in those things that we understand as 'natural' (see Castree, 2003b). This is because these processes can assume that the involved entities are amenable to being easily managed when, as Castree (2003b, page 275) again contends, some materials are clearly quite contrary. In this regard, the garden centre, and the ways in which certain items are practically managed there, makes for an apposite example through which to explore how contemporary societies relate to the intimate agencies associated with specific things.

The popular arguments that I began with were in response to representations that seemed to suggest that a garden was becoming an easily acquired consumer asset. Commercial research, meanwhile, has also indicated that, in the United Kingdom, consumers are spending more than ever on their garden spaces (Mintel, 1999). The component parts to particular private gardens may, therefore, be obtained increasingly through market mechanisms. The question that follows is how easy is it for us to co-opt living beings into this kind of commercial process? How, in sites such as the garden centre, are the individual agencies that inhere within the items on sale there dealt with and, crucially, is this changing? Although geographical accounts have, I think, tended to celebrate the active attributes of new nonhumans, in this paper I want to attend to the practices at large in a site where they are also problematic. This paper is, therefore, about animated plant experiences and how easily they are accommodated within current approaches to acquisition. The argument is that, by focusing on mundane practice, it is possible to both reconsider the contemporary garden and reflect on certain evident approaches to the experience of city lives—both human and otherwise.

The vital life of things

This research began with consumption studies in which, although this area of enquiry clearly contains a range of agendas, I have particularly drawn on this field in terms of questioning the experiences involved in buying, selling, and otherwise acquiring actual items. A focus on consumption draws attention to the ways in which items are marketed and managed through a set of interconnected sites (see Kopytoff, 1986; Marcus, 1995; Miller, 1997) in which, in recent times, anthropological ideas from material culture studies have emphasised the intimate experiences evident within them (see, for instance, Lien, 1997; Miller, 1997). Following the 'ethnographic moment' of consumption (Jackson and Thrift, 1995), a range of authors have now reconsidered the practised relations that we forge with particular commodities and what they reveal about the cultural character of the people that are doing. For a project concerned with potentially changing plant practice, this seemed like a useful starting point. Yet, as my work progressed, it became increasingly clear that these apparently agnostic approaches do implicitly tend to structure the reality with which they are presented and this was, crucially, in a way that was less than fully welcoming to the living plant. The ethnographic argument, as applied here, has been shy of any agency that is unfamiliar to more-traditional cultural concerns. Although this stance usefully advocates close contact with actual physical phenomena, the independent willfullness of individual entities has been largely ignored.

This is for a number of reasons that relate to the specifically anthropological aims of much ethnographic work. I outline these more fully elsewhere (Hitchings, 2004) where they include a preoccupation with the reproduction of group cultures, a methodology which implicitly stabilises patterns of practice and a disciplinary history that privileges docile physical forms (see also Bolton, 2001). In this context, things have indeed appeared as the 'materials' of 'culture' (Miller, 1998), as a controlling human hand seemed confidently to ignore the potentially contrary character of the objects involved. Human geography was also complicit here in a concern for the 'sociabilities' associated with particular consumption spaces [on this see, for example, Crewe (2000) or Malbon (1999)]. This area has implicitly suffered from what Colloredo-Mansfield (2003, page 246) calls a "presumption of object durability" which, in certain ways, downplays the active role of materials. These researchers were broadly concerned with 'social' agencies and, given that they draw on anthropological approaches, this is perhaps unsurprising. As such, one important question for consumption studies is, if the world's materials can 'kick back' (Barad, 1998, cited in Whatmore, 2002, page 5) and 'object' (Latour, 2000) to our ways of representing or repressing them in the manner that 'nonhuman geographies' have started to suggest, then how is this obstinacy made manifest within a close concern for the actual experiences of buying, selling, and living with them? Although nonhumans are not fully 'social' in terms of being the same as us, they are certainly 'sociable' in terms of actively forging relationships with us (Hinchliffe, 2001). Yet do we feel them to be friendly or fearsome, helpful or harrowing, and what can the encounters that gather between us in specific sites say about contemporary consumption?

Even though ethnographic approaches to consumption have tended to stupefy objects and deny them a life they nonetheless have, these methodologies are still determinedly anchored in empirical contexts. Certain geographical stances, meanwhile, have started to suggest how animate matter can compromise the ways in which we try to organise ourselves and others. In this paper I seek to reconcile these two agendas through an ethnographic examination of commodification—the process by which objects are produced for exchange—and how it is performed with various materials and with variable success. As I mentioned earlier, commodification is especially complex

when dealing with those things that we classify as 'natural' insofar as these things can possess, by way of being 'natural', certain capabilities. In the garden, it may be exactly these capabilities that we value when we think of those things found there as 'natural.' Yet, in the garden centre, we may be more used to taking a different kind of approach. For Latour, only some entities are allowed to imaginatively populate particular places and this depends on the way in which particular 'collectives' of human and nonhuman are allowed to come together within them (Latour, 2004). Where we allow ourselves to experience unfamiliar agencies, therefore, is as much about "the contexts of social practices" as about more "privileged sets of metaphysical principles" (Robinson, 2002, page 279; see also Ingold, 2000; Jones and Cloke, 2002; Paden, 1994) and, when nonhuman agencies can clearly complicate commercial practice, it becomes interesting to explore how easily they are accommodated within it. This is my aim in this paper.

The empirical example

In order to explore what can be done with this argument, I travelled to seven garden centres in London. Garden retail has received some recent attention within economic geography (Church, 2001; Lee, 2000), as the specificity of such sites has begun to be explored. Yet what have not yet been focused upon in such studies are the practices that we perform together with the specific materials that are found there. To do so would require a period of close empirical work within some of these sites and this is exactly what I sought to do. The location was London, because this was a context which, according to market research, might epitomise a wider unease with regard to the interactions that living gardens can require. Although Londoners are, for instance, as likely as any other regional group to buy growing stock for their gardens, they are also much more likely to buy hard materials and immediately decorative fixed things (Mintel, 2001) and much less likely to own any garden tools (KeyNote, 2004). As such, it could be argued from these aggregate data that they exemplify the changes that media commentators have often tended to lament. With this in mind, research was conducted within seven sites as, after contacting all those centres listed in Internet directories, seven eventually agreed to be part of the project. Within these, a range of methods was employed according to the degree of access that I was allowed and how the centres were able to illuminate my particular issues of interest. This meant extended periods of observation, tours of the centres with staff, informal talks with workers, and more-formal interviews with their managers.

Methodologically, anthropological ethnographies tend to skate over practical concerns by simply stating that it is important just to see what makes sense within the individual site of study (Russell, 1995). Geographical arguments about agency, meanwhile, seem to suggest that we need to undertake a much more radical rethinking of research (Whatmore, 1999). In this instance, my own work trod a line between these two arguments, as I adjusted certain conventional methodologies to understand better how, at the garden centre, the capacities of those things on sale there could complicate human practices. Interviews were as much about practical actions as they were about reflective understandings. Observation was as much about how people interacted with things, as about how they interacted with each other. Apparently idle talk was oriented as much around what people were physically doing, as around how they felt about it. Clearly certain social-science strategies 'enact' (Law and Urry, 2002) the world in particular ways and this is certainly the case within plant places (Hitchings and Jones, 2004). The point for me, however, was to select those strategies that were most appropriate in terms of generating both a rounded sense of how these sites operated and an understanding of how these operations were materially managed.

As I have intimated, one organising concern in this endeavour was for the practices surrounding plants. However, this is not to say that it is only plants that were to interest me. Plants are interesting only insofar as they are different or similar to other items. Indeed, I would argue that they are better understood through such comparisons. I was interested, therefore, in examining why and when plants are bought at this site and, equally, when and why they are not. In this sense I would align myself to Descola's (1994) argument for a 'single social' where my interest in plant experience is folded into an analysis of the wider forces at work within particular places. What follows is, therefore, a close consideration of the encounters staged between people, plants, and other items in a number of London garden centres. Some centres were more centrally located, others were out towards the city's edge. Some had more of a retail background, whereas others had an established gardening pedigree. Some had the different items on sale all mixed together, whereas others tended towards clearly assigned areas. Despite their differences, there were nonetheless many commonalities in their ways of working, the challenges they felt they faced, and how they were, at that time, trying to meet them. These provide the focus for the empirical discussions that follow. To reiterate, my argument is that if our relations with plants and gardens are potentially difficult then this might be especially so within the commercial sites of the garden centre and particularly so in London. It is with this in mind that I now turn to what was happening there.

Initial encounters

According to many managers, the London garden centre was quite different to its suburban counterpart. Unlike their more expansive equivalents outside the city, they had less space as they nestled within marginal city sites—under railway arches, in former factory buildings, behind housing terraces. They also had higher rents and, as such, the importance of profit loomed large for them. Rising land values meant that they needed to generate sufficient revenues, before they soon found that some other business had supplanted them there. Yet, more interestingly for this paper, this distinctiveness was also, according to them, connected to their customer profiles. The people that came to them were apparently purposeful. They were 'from London' and, by implication, they were efficiently organised, as an evident pace of urban living was seen to locally influence people's approaches to getting things done.

This was interesting because these customers were also presented as peculiarly impractical and, observationally at least, people were often unsure of themselves. Although there were evident exceptions, most frequently with the older customer, many tended to pace slowly and uncertainly around in a way that jarred with the energetic image of confident city life, and some materials were more likely to prompt this kind of approach than others. Items on sale were encountered in various ways and this seemed associated with the properties they possessed. With plants, for instance, many customers simply seemed less able. Around plants people would often talk little, approach nervously, and, more generally, not quite know how best to behave. Around other items, such as pots, planters, or patio sets, encounters were often much more animated as there seemed much more confidence evident in the interactions that, then, became possible. By watching movements through those centres that had items in different allocated areas this was sometimes striking as the pace and patter would suddenly slow when they entered the section that had only plants within.

There were a number of possible explanations here. One was that hard materials were better at visible variation. Colours and glazes, metals and moulds, woods and primers—there were many elements to comment on here, as discussions easily centred on the connotations associated with different colours, styles, and shapes. Plants, meanwhile,

were simply not as arresting—as Laura put it (interview 2) "it's not as if someone is going to just go 'oh look at that lovely green plant!' " Plants have, to an extent, no choice but to be 'green' and this restriction correspondingly made them, in many instances, experientially unexciting for customers. As others argue elsewhere, the 'greenness' of vegetative life can make for an uninspiring interaction for people in the contemporary West (Schneekloth, 1989). This was often equally so in the London garden centre.

Male: "I personally think that they look nicer in the wooden ones, but if you want that ..."

Female: "Well I think that it's more classic, and it would go very well with the brick. Don't you think so? I think that it's a totally different sort of colour."

[Whilst talking in this way, this mid-twenties man takes a bay tree and puts it in one of the terracotta pots. Once this is done, he starts rummaging around with some of the others. Then he tries it out in another. He is quick and determined, lifting pots up, feeling their thickness and moving them around—almost like he is building a jigsaw.]

Female: "So, John, do you really hate those barrels?"

Male: "Well if you really want one, then we can have one, I suppose. But which colour do you like?"

Female: "I really prefer that one to be honest—the green one. I think that it provides a better contrast."

[After further lively discussion, they eventually get the pot that she suggests. They seem to have a sense of satisfaction. The bay tree, meanwhile, was almost incidental to the whole process] (observation session 8).

Hard materials were also more amenable to physical interaction. In one centre that I spent time at, for example, the climbing clematis were stacked up alongside each other in an attempt to arrange them into an orderly rack of items. Yet they were determined to extend themselves towards the sun and they did so quite quickly. As such they would often entwine into each other and, in so doing, would knot themselves together into a mass of matter, rather than an arrangement of articles. Correspondingly, people were often nervous about pulling them apart. Workers sometimes found this comic in the way in which couples would anxiously discuss whether they really ought to. In some centres, it became a morning job for certain staff to disentangle them in advance. Observationally there was also a wider unease about whether plants should be touched. With pots, meanwhile, people would idly and unthinkingly toss them in the air, move them around or touch and tap their surfaces. As one manager put it, hard materials were just more resolutely 'there' for people (Geoff, interview 2) and, as a result, they could be easily handled as evidently individual items (see figure 1).

Furniture provides another good example. As Leslie and Reimer (2003) argue, the furniture market is currently on the move as people are no longer inclined to consider particular pieces in terms of physical durability, but rather through the lens of social display. Consumers are increasingly schooled in trading the connotations of certain styles and increasingly unhappy about sticking with the same selection of chairs, for instance. As such, there is money in this market and, in the garden centre, this was also evident. For Geoff, furniture was "easier for them to understand" (interview 2) and suppliers, for their part, were providing ever-expanding ranges that could be co-opted more easily into registers of self expression. Customers, meanwhile, were clearly welcoming the opportunity for a more familiar kind of encounter. The same was to be said of statuary. In tactical selling terms, Laura argued that many customers were unsure of plants and, correspondingly, they could be massaged more easily into buying something from the range she had in stock. However, the story with statuary

Figure 1. Prevalent pot displays that were experienced with a comparative ease.

was quite different. Here, if she didn't have something that they thought, at the outset, was right for them, then there was no point really in trying to talk them around. The implication, of course, was that it was better to stock more statues, and fewer plants, as people could always be persuaded about plants. Indeed, it was sometimes even thought better to have a smaller plant selection, as choosing from a wider range would prove too difficult for the customers of today:

> "With these [garden statuary], people do really know the one that they want, and you are not going to be able to palm something else off onto them. With plants, though, you can! You can suggest something similar and they will go for it … but you can't with the modern-looking things. Like you would say 'well have this metal chicken [an example garden ornament that was close to hand] instead of the stone Buddha'—it just doesn't work!" (Laura, interview 2).

Sadalla and Sheets (1993) document how building materials are differentially equipped for conveying social messages and this is, they argued, because of the range of forms that these materials are able to assume. Whether your house is made from stone, wood, or concrete, they argued, can effectively communicate messages about your creativity, style, or class. Other elements of external domestic environments, however, now seem less able to undertake this kind of carriage. Although certain scholars have suggested that all materials have now become saturated with symbolic meanings (Leiss et al, 1990), it seems that some were more-willing sponges than others. Actively living entities seem less-happily handled within habituated practices of communicating through consumption. For the majority of the customers that I observed and discussed, their immediate 'skill' (Ingold, 2000) was greater with hard materials than with softer plants as, both physically and symbolically, certain goods were managed with more familiarity.

Managers felt that customers were dynamic, then, because they probably were. It was just they did not quite know how to be so when on their own amongst trays of uninspiring, undifferentiated, and potentially animate plants and, given the stated

importance of pursuing profit, this phenomenon was to be responded to. The amount of space allocated to things such as pots, seats, statues, and other fixed features was anecdotally increasing, as managers tried to better align the items on offer with a perceived set of current customer competencies. With regard to the contradictions of nonhuman commodification that I began this paper with, an attention to the "material culture of commodity production" (Mansfield, 2003) was starting to suggest that plants were now harder to efficiently experience in the ways that other items were. They were less-evidently part of a category of 'material culture' and this made them problematic. People were more used to attributes that plants did not possess. Sometimes plants were too limited with regard to the range of physical forms they could assume. At other times, they were too lively and people were unsure of what they might subsequently do. One manager had a positive slant on how he handled this issue, but this was, nevertheless, not to deny the phenomenon:

> "We have had to reduce the number of them [plants], but also the good things about pots is that you can put a plant in a pot, so that doesn't take as much space … but yes, I suppose we have, we have had to sort of rob Peter to pay Paul ... we have had to cut down on plants" (John, interview 2).

Preparing products

Although in the previous section I explored some of the difficulties involved in the process, according to managers, customers still apparently came with the intention of buying plants. These were, it was staunchly argued, "garden centres after all" (Laura, interview 2). The problem was rather that, these days, customers often did not quite know which ones to buy and this made for another interesting scenario. Managers wanted to keep stocking plants, customers certainly expected to see them there, and there was a general sense that they always would be bought. Yet, as I have argued, because of their particular propensities, plants were often experienced with unease. Given these complicating qualities, I now examine why certain plants were proving popular and how those plants on sale were to be presented.

> A young couple, maybe early thirties, are moving around a set of plants. Wandering really. They seem aimless—occasionally looking at a label ... and then moving away. Nothing more. She says "it's ok, mmm, well maybe I'd quite like a bigger one, but I don't know". Then they go back into quiet, 'ums' and 'ahs'. In the end they put the one that they picked up back. There are building works behind the centre and they talk animatedly about that for a while. It is almost like this is something for them to latch onto—"wonder what it's going to be". Then it's back into the silence and a confused kind of roaming around. Then they see the cactuses. "Ah look at the cactus—they are great aren't they?" "Yes look at all the different shapes!" "Shall we get some of those? ... I like that big upright one" (observation session 6).

Observationally and anecdotally, it was true that certain plants found more favour than others. The cactus, for instance, could be more confidently approached, as it was more clearly differentiated and easy to comment upon. That is to say that it has a variety of fixed forms that seemed, like the furniture, to be more resolutely 'there.' Bulbs and seeds, by contrast, were proving less popular or, at least, they were not really where the money was. Seeds were interesting in the way in which certain staff discussed them with reference primarily to children, as though it were only school projects that might be interested in growing things from scratch. The corollary, of course, was that, once an adult, you were no longer likely to want to experience agency in the gradually unfolding way that emerges from a seed. Bulbs were interesting in that it was only the most suburban centre that did not report a decline in sales.

This suburban centre was part of a chain that stretched across London and its manager told me how, when individual sites had stock that was not moving, they would pass it between them until it was eventually sold. In this instance, one thing that was, therefore, flowing out from the city was the bulb. That is to say there was an urban geography of interest in bulb cultivation here, where the suburbs contained people more likely to get along well with them. Geoff concurred as, for him, bulbs were really for a certain type of unexciting person—"you wouldn't see a city slicker coming in and saying he wanted a load of bulbs" (interview 2).

Figure 2. The hidden hosta whose potential life often proved problematic.

"You try and get them interested but they are, like, it's just a pot of earth—they don't want to take a chance with what is just a pot of earth!" (Sam, interview 2) (see figure 2).

Herbaceous plants, like the hosta in figure 2, die down in the winter. As a result, they were often overlooked. Current customers were thought to be uninspired about buying what was, for the moment at least, only a 'pot of earth.' There was potential brimming within these pots, for sure, but many people, presumably including these 'city slickers', no longer wanted to wait. Plants, like the tree fern, which were larger and more immediately arresting, were, meanwhile, in demand. The current customer, or at least the customer that was perceived to be worth pursuing, seemed more inclined to get these as a means of making an immediately 'impactful' garden. Centres were selling bigger plants than ever and, indeed, for one, the business and the plants were starting to outgrow the van that they used for postpurchase delivery. Customers were buying large striking specimens that they wanted immediately available. An example would be the *Buxus* box tree. They were taking up more precious centre space than ever and they were particularly popular because they were hardy and could be clipped into shapes. These plants would occasionally produce a wayward spurt of leaves, as they struggled free from assigned architectural forms. Yet these were soon trimmed back, so that a cultural display of stylish shapes could quickly resume. Immediate visual 'impact' was superseding any explicit intimation of active plant personality. People now seemed to prefer plants with a 'bit more solidity about them' (James, interview 2) (figure 3).

Figure 3. *Buxus* taking up much space in one small centre.

"You have to say that coming into the shop now with the carpet down, it changes the atmosphere of the shop completely—less of a greenhouse, more of a shopping environment. It's something that people can *click into*. I think people like shopping in comfort now, they don't like getting wet, getting dirty, they like pleasant music, heating, carpet under their feet … with garden centres in particular" (David, interview 1).

People seemed to want bigger, solid, striking plants and these were to be presented in a certain way. Customers were increasingly to be given a more familiar environment into which they could 'click' and this could mean downplaying the presence of potential life. In many centres, plants were formerly organised into an alphabetical index of Latin names. Yet this system was increasingly being replaced by an artistic approach that injected 'drama' into displays. That is to say, that presentation geared towards the knowledgeable customer was increasingly seen as redundant. It was much better to orchestrate an immediately striking shopping environment. For Geoff, business was really about the "retail side of things, not the knowledge side of things" now (interview 2). In one centre, at least, plants were deemed more exciting when described in terms of certain 'traditional' or 'historic' associations, rather than specifying their maintenance requirements. It was here, as elsewhere, thought better if they could be made to culturally come alive, rather than physically live. Inherent agency was underplayed:

Author: "So how do you go about giving them information about the plants that you have then?"

Phillip: "We've got bed labels—like a little card above saying the required situations—but also, well, you see that one behind you, it's what we call an emotive sign, which is not so technical but it gives you a bit of history, something to make it a bit more romantic, more interesting—we call them emotive signs .... It's to make that plant sound more interesting—not to say that it just needs acid soil, grows to 3.2 metres ... that sort of thing" (Phillip, interview 1).

These trends were most-strikingly manifest through a phenomenon that has fascinated me throughout this research. This is the plant guarantee. Customers could be nervous about plant care, high-street retailers would guarantee their goods, and managers aimed at emulating their business practices. With these ideas in mind, providing a guarantee makes a lot of sense. Having said that, the guarantee also made for some awkward encounters. Managers are here, after all, offering to guarantee something which is, on a fundamental level, unpredictable. Plants are always, to an extent, living insofar as they respond to their surroundings and the events of their experience.

A guarantee, meanwhile, assumes the plant will do as predicted, that it will perform exactly in an anticipated way—that it will not "just go wrong" as Laura put it (interview 2). In the garden such stability will be rare, even though guarantees suggest that it is not, as they act to allay associated concerns. The argument was that people wanted products, not processes—controlled commodities, not unpredictable plants. Whatever the subsequent risk, it was thought better to make plants appear under control and to secretly hope that customers could cope when it became clear that they were not.

Discussions of 'dirt'—as the unbecoming evidence of an environment not closely controlled into the right retail experience—were, for similar reasons, difficult. Geoff, for instance, had previously had a problem with one employee. She was quite a bit older than him and she also had some traditional ways of working. He, however, was pushing for a physical reorganisation and representational redeployment of the centre and these two eventually had an argument. He told her that she had to clean up the area where she worked. She said "it was a garden centre" so "it was supposed to be a bit dirty". The trouble, though, was that for him this was no longer the case. Eventually she left. I discussed 'dirt' at all the centres I visited and there were always some difficulties involved. All were living out the tensions that Geoff's argument illustrates. Some were more resigned to soil going astray, although all thought that this should nowadays not be allowed. There were clearly some competing modes of 'ordering' matter in evidence here (Law, 1994) as current retail frameworks rubbed up uneasily against, and often replaced, more-traditional takes on the experiences associated with plants.

In order to understand commodities Cook (1994) argues that we should attend to the 'symbiotic intertwining' that involves both material production and symbolic presentation. In this vein, it now seems that the interplay of physical attribute and symbolic portrayal were reorganising themselves in such a way that the important thing was to present plants as almost inanimate. In response to perceived market movements, managers and staff alike were organising the garden-centre experience in a way which clearly 'configured' (Woolgar, 1991) customer competence. Unruly agencies became either physically (as with the cactus) or presentationally (as with the guarantee) less apparent. Plants were marshalled into certain frameworks where they appeared to be easily managed in an almost machinic way. The result is, of course, one that partly impedes alternative ways of experiencing, and possibly embracing, plant agency. It is to these that I turn next.

Constraining care

For Laura, and others, there were 'traditional gardeners' and then there were 'nontraditional gardeners.' The nontraditional gardener represented an expanding market, made of young, busy professionals who wanted to get things organised quickly and attractively (Laura, interview 1). These were the 'London' customers that were introduced earlier and they were imaginatively in the ascendance. Because of this Geoff tried to ensure that his centre never appeared to be too 'gardeney' (interview 1) as this might confuse the kind of customer he was after. For Philip, London gardens were not really about 'growing' anymore (Phillip, interview 1) as plants were recast as products to be bought by those that wanted to 'get' a garden. Witness the increased availability of trolleys in some centres and their associations of efficient supermarket expediency, rather than the gradual growth of a hobby. These perceptions may, of course, be exactly that—they may only be ideas that centres had made the momentary mistake of acquiring. Yet, in one instance, if not more, this pattern was proving profitable—Paul related how, although the number of individual items sold were down, overall profits were up—people were coming less, but they were spending more. In this centre, and others, customers were indeed increasingly 'getting', not 'growing', their gardens (see figure 4).

Figure 4. 'Getting a garden' with the aid of the trolley.

Examples such as these stack up and suggest the difficulties involved in approaching animate 'life' within these sites. Agency was almost annoying here. Approaching an evident 'life' was an awkward experience and one which, through certain physical manoeuvres, people were, for the moment, partly able to avoid. Far from always being easy social markers, Miller (2001) suggests that there is sometimes an unfamiliar power that is channelled through the things we acquire. His argument is that we can be almost 'haunted' by these things, as they can contain the enduring effect of someone, or something, strange. This idea, I think, captures something of the rumbling agencies that plants purvey within the London garden centre. In this account, many city folk seemed almost haunted by a life that lingers within certain entities whereas managers can try to effect a temporary imaginative exorcism. Yet this is not to say that other approaches were not also evident.

Many managers, staff, and customers often had other feelings for plants. There remained something about plants, and their agency, that these people were both defensive about and positive towards. Almost all managers were eager to emphasise how, despite countervailing initiatives, they were definitely and defiantly still 'plant-based' garden centres. All also enjoyed the recognition that plants could, sometimes, struggle free from the controlled frameworks that they professionally sought to impose. In fact, working with plants was almost uniformly presented as a pleasure. These were living things with "as much of a will to live as [us]" (Sam interview 1) and such will was now rightly, it seemed, to be embraced. However, although this was a kind of care that many seemed to share with regard to their stock, and although they were eager to, whenever possible, inculcate similar approaches in their customers, there was, nevertheless, a sense that trends were taking them elsewhere.

Author: "Do you think of the plants and the things that you sell, then, as products?"
Phillip: "Yes we do. Like a tin of baked beans, yes they are products. Often people [referring to other people working in the industry] like their plants and they don't want to throw things away that should be thrown away, they like to tend things ... but yes they are products. And you have to be ruthless because you have to maintain the quality" (Phillip, interview 2).

For centre staff, it was good to get to know plants—it was good to learn about them, to work with them, and to watch them develop. Yet turnover was now such that plants would have passed through their hands long before any individual plant personalities became present. The experiential pleasure of nonhuman life was, it seemed, increasingly replaced by the pursuit of profit. Sam, for instance, described how he deliberately took this job in a garden centre, rather than continuing in garden design. His initial thought was that he could be closer to plants this way, but he was now increasingly convinced that "plants just aren't enough anymore" (interview 2), for the current challenge, it seems, is to be "more than just a garden centre". Some centres called themselves 'nurseries'. Yet this was increasingly an historical inheritance and not any indication of contemporary practice. Even though they may have preferred it to be otherwise, staff were increasingly spectators to, rather than coaches for, their speedily changing stock of plants. Plant 'life' was becoming less experientially evident for workers, as much as for customers here, even though these workers, we might speculate, would be more welcoming towards it. Centres could try to foster the pleasure of gradually coming to understand the different needs of active plants—yet the extent to which they were now able to do so was, it seemed, out of their hands. The market was moving on and, like it or not, they were obliged to keep pace (see figure 5).

Affections associated with experienced agency were being sidelined. Many customers (often with good reason) did not trust that they had the knowledge to take care of the living things they bought and, as such, it made a lot of sense to give them those that seemed less alive. As I contended earlier, rather than anything more removed, how we relate to plants might be very much about the ways in which our experiences with them are organised. Guthrie (1993), for instance, suggests that, when we are lacking in human relations, we are more inclined to forge them with living plants. However, it seems that in these centres the converse was the case, as people who were themselves

Figure 5. Attempting to change with a perceived changing market.

very busy had no time to deal with animate entities. Lee (2000) talks about how, within the horticultural industry, a certain suboptimal economic 'geography of regard' finds form. Through the respect and experience that horticulturists share, he argues, a peculiarly productive, but not profit-maximising, culture has been able to persist. One aspect, I think, may be the way in which, through the enjoyment of plants, dictates of self-interest can become less pressing as an exciting agency can be collectively marvelled at by those who share a certain set of 'ecological attachments' (Hinchliffe et al, 2003) and a particular "commodity-specific consumption culture" (Jackson, 2004, page 173). Yet, in this instance, elements of this culture were under threat. Plants were finding it increasingly difficult to 'perform themselves' into a position where they can inculcate a kind of animistic care. Staff, meanwhile, were well aware of the ironies involved in avoiding these agencies that they also thought they were there to advocate:

> It's fairly quiet, so I go and have chat with Thomas (who had been put in charge that day). There had just been a bit of a demanding customer and I asked about that. He said that it was interesting and in some ways it was very much "a London thing". He has worked all around the country and he had never come across the type of person that "you can sometimes get here". He said it was strange but sometimes you would get the sort of person that just wanted everything now and they could be quite rude—"it was quite odd—the sort of person that gets angry because you haven't got what they want and because you take time to get the thing that they need—usually rich people to be honest". He told me a story about this one customer. She wanted to have a discount because some leaves were damaged on the specific plant that she wanted. This was "just ridiculous" he bemoaned—"it would grow another one anyway!" We laughed. But only a little—and there seemed to be a sort of resigned bemusement to this (observation session 4).

Life and death in London

Ethnographic consumption studies, in line with wider anthropological approaches to material culture, tend to ignore the inherent active abilities that all materials can contain. By attending to the agency of specific entities, particularly plants, I have sought to explore how we can become better sensitised to the ways in which certain unexpected forces are received within practices of buying and selling. Building on arguments abroad in geography, I have sought to enliven existing approaches to consumption through a concern for how a certain kind of 'life' is manifest within everyday encounters. The importance of this endeavour stems from the way in which, rather than standing nonhumans outside our social systems of routine living, this approach attends to how their attributes are always to be accommodated within these very systems. As such, recent recastings of 'nature' are usefully explored according to how easily they adhere to actual experience.

In this paper, I have visited seven garden centres in London and described how nonhuman 'life' is currently accommodated there. Thrift (2003) suggests that academics tend to neglect the "distinct performative capabilities" that inhere within specific commodities and, as I argued at the outset, those things that we sometimes classify as 'natural' can be particularly performative. In the empirical case of the London garden centre it emerged that, although living plants can potentially create an enjoyable culture of care, in actuality they increasingly make for an uneasy experience of agency and an infrastructure where things were, for the moment at least, made to seem closely controlled. This was, as is always the case, an 'incomplete' nonhuman commodification (Castree, 2003b, page 288). Yet it was also one where people were finding ingenious new ways of overcoming the active 'barriers' (Castree, 2003b, page 288) that nonhumans, by

virtue of the fact that they have their own independent agendas, can put in the way of this process.

People "enslave matter to take it to market" (Rose, 1995, page 67). Yet some matters are less-willing slaves than others. With these ideas in mind, I have discussed a number of negotiated examples and, in conclusion, it seems reasonable to suggest that a significant element of the evolving human–plant relationship in London is associated with certain cultures of commodification and control. As we know, with 'commodification' comes 'alienation' and the idea of people becoming physically and morally detached from the things with which they were once intimate. Using this idea, I want to now finally connect the analysis I have presented here to some relevant wider arguments about the relationship between contemporary city life and gradual plant process.

Modern urbanites in the West have elsewhere been seen to encounter plant places with difficulty (Burgess, 1995) or indifference (Kong et al, 1999). In line with these analyses is the historical decline in the variety of terms that we use for vegetation (Witkowski et al, 1981). When people might have previously said 'oak', 'elm', or 'ash', for instance, we increasingly just say 'tree,' because, as Witkowski et al (1981) argue, with increased urbanisation, and a decreased intimacy between humans and other organisms, we have found the detail of established vocabularies to be somewhat unnecessary. Other work, meanwhile, suggests an increase in the array of terms actively used for colour (Berlin and Kay, 1969). This is again, so the authors suggest, a consequence of changing lifestyles and the spectrum that we have routinely made available for ourselves. We perhaps, therefore, now know 'magnolia' as a potential paint choice for the living room, rather than a living tree with which we might cohabit. Nonhuman life-forms may be increasingly unfamiliar as we treat them in more uniform and removed manners. To the dismay of those like Latour (2004), it seems that, in practical routine, we increasingly deal in bigger categories here, rather than exploring the exciting attributes of the characters they contain. Witness the way that people do so very often imaginatively employ a notion of 'nature' (Dickens, 1996, page 5), rather than aiming at anything more precise.

In the London garden centre, at least, it seems that the 'services' (Shove, 2003) we expect, or at least are habituated into acquiring, from gardens might be changing, and changing in a way where we could find ourselves foregoing potential pleasures for the sake of more instant impacts. There is an "ontological choreography" (Cussins, 1998) performed within plant places and, crucially, this is choreographed by people through practice. Some people are more determined to amend things so that strange agencies are more easily controlled, whereas others enjoy a more open kind of experience. Nevertheless, in these sites, although we could be 'participating' with nature (Zweers, 2000), it rather seems that some habituated and commodified shopping strategies are 'melting' (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001) into plant shopping practice.

In research, policy, and popular understanding, 'nature' is often uncritically held up as something that people simply benefit from being with. Recasting these assertions through a focus on specific plant practices, I have used the pleasures and problems evident in one city site to reconsider the ways in which current citizens do, or do not, derive well-being from its associated 'nature' experiences. The conclusion that follows points to a potential perversity. As others argue, being with living plants can, it seems, simply "make people feel better" (Sheets and Mantzer, 1991, page 302). That is to say that, although we do not quite know how, we are sure that having plants close to hand is something that does us good. Many psychological studies concur (see, for example, Ulrich, 1984; Kaplan, 2001) and there also seems to be something intuitively unpleasant about the idea of substituting living vegetation with more 'plastic' kinds of equivalent

(Krieger, 1973). Yet, having said all that, the contemporary physical and mental management of animate matter is another issue altogether. What, amongst others, the plant guarantee, the prevalence of pots, and the strategies of managers suggest is that, although there is a pleasure to be had in relinquishing some control, current customers at the London garden centre are often more used to being immediately in charge. Although we may like being with the actively alive, in certain city spaces, we now deal much better with things that are more dead.

Acknowledgements. This paper has benefited from presentation at both Cardiff University and University College London. I would also like to thank the anonymous referees for their thoughtful advice and the ESRC whose postdoctoral fellowship gave me the time to complete this piece. As always, however, I am mostly in debt to the people that gave up their time to help with the fieldwork.

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